

California Department of Fish and Game Black Bear Management Program
<http://www.dfg.ca.gov/hunting/bear/depredation.html>

Depredation

Many new mountain residents or visitors are surprised when they first discover a black bear rummaging through their garbage or walking across their deck in the early morning. Bears, distributed throughout most mountainous regions of the state, are always looking for their next meal, and if the food is simple to obtain, all the better.

In these situations, bears quickly learn to expect to find food at these locations. Initially these encounters with bears are enjoyed or acceptable to the landowners or residents. However, as the encounters turn into a major nuisance or significant property damage begins to occur, residents view the bears as unwanted pests or even public safety threats.

The brute strength of bears coupled with their generalized diet and excellent sense of smell makes them a very capable raider of homes, cabins, barns, recreational vehicles, campgrounds, cars, and a variety of other private property. A bear can successfully take a door off its hinges if it can fit a claw or two into the gap between the frame and the door. A bear can tear the siding off a home or cabin to gain entry, or rip through the shingles to come in through the attic. Anticipation of an easy meal makes the trouble of destroying property worthwhile.

The Department of Fish and Game (DFG) recognizes that bears react to the environment around them. It is natural for a bear to investigate all attractive smells and consume whatever seems like food. The only real solution to a bear problem is to eliminate the attractant. Black bears are legally designated as a game mammal in California. As such, bear hunting follows a regulated process that includes obtaining a tag and restricting hunting to a specified season. However, Section 4181.1 of the Fish and Game Code states that landowners may kill a bear encountered in the act of molesting or injuring livestock. In the case of a problem bear, the law provides for the issuance of a depredation permit to landowners or tenants who experience property damage from bears. The permit allows the permittee or designee to kill the offending bear regardless of the time of year. But a depredation permit is the last step in a series of steps taken to eliminate the problem.

DFG's bear depredation policy represents a progressive response system based upon the degree of damage being caused. Bear situations are categorized and then addressed. In the first category, a bear strays into a populated area and cannot readily return to bear habitat. This bear has simply found itself in the wrong place. In most situations, removal of the antagonists or distractions from the area will allow the bear to return to nearby bear habitat with no other incident. Designated a "no harm no foul," techniques to remove the bear may include, but are not limited to the use of sound makers, pepper spray, rubber slug shot shells or sling shot projectiles to drive the bear

away or haze the bear out of the area. Tranquilizing and removing the bear can be used if other methods are determined to be unsafe or have been unsuccessful.

In the second category, a bear becomes habituated to humans and may be a nuisance problem (no property damage involved) by tipping over garbage cans, invading compost piles, walking across porches, and so forth. Previously captured bears that have returned to areas of human habitation are included in this category. In these cases, the landowner or tenant is informed of reasonable corrective measures as a solution to the problem, which includes but is not limited to: area clean-up, removal of trash or other food attractants, bear-proofing food storage areas, electric fencing, temporary closure of campsites. As mentioned above, techniques to remove the bear may include, but are not limited to the use of sound makers, rubber slug shot shells or sling shot projectiles to drive the bear away or haze the bear out of the area.

In the third category, a bear causes real property damage to a dwelling(s), structure(s), vehicle(s), apiaries, etc., or is a repeat offender (the bear has been previously captured or hazed by DFG employees). If the damage is minor and there are no other previous reports of damage? The first action is implementation of reasonable corrective measures to remove attractants as outlined for the second category. Corrective measures must be made prior to, or in addition to, issuing a depredation permit. When a bear has caused extensive or chronic damage to private property (such as livestock killed or injured, or entered into a home or cabin), repeated damage where corrective or bear-proofing efforts have failed, etc., DFG issues a depredation permit.

A bear is killed about 40 percent of the time a depredation permit is issued. Over the 25-year period (1977 - 2001), males represent 81 percent of the bears taken on depredation permits. This is partly due to the larger home ranges of male bears and greater aggression between males, causing them to move to less suitable areas.

Depredation permits over the past 25 years have been issued for a variety of reasons. Fifty percent of the depredation permits were issued for damage caused to structures or other property such as vehicles, trailers, recreational vehicles, etc. Livestock represented the next most abundant category with 15 percent. Livestock includes cattle, sheep, goats, pigs and horses. Orchards and fowl (chickens, geese and ducks) each represented 11 percent of the total, and beehives represented 8 percent. Crops, safety and pets represent the final 5 percent.

The best methods for preventing bears from falling into any category in the DFG policy is for humans to live smartly in bear habitat. Taking the first step toward living responsibly in bear habitat will make the last step of the DFG bear policy unnecessary.